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Inclusive Approaches to Agribusiness: Research at the Cutting Edge

Upstream academic research and downstream development practice are often divided - even when they share similar goals for empowering the rural poor. International agricultural research, through the CGIAR, has attempted to bridge this gap by combining research, capacity strengthening and development. An example is the Learning Alliance approach, applied by CIAT and CRS in thirty-five countries globally.

Designing a Learning Alliance

1. Begin at the Beginning

Research activities are often bolted onto existing development projects to answer questions about impact or technical issues. Or, development projects are considered delivery mechanisms for research findings. Combining research and development to respond to key issues through a unique lens means building a collective learning agenda, and engaging key actors and decision-makers early.

2. Measure What Matters Consistently

To drive more collaborative projects, common and consistent indicators and tools are needed to track development outcomes and understand what works where, for which populations and why. Having a common evaluation framework, set of tools and methods for results analysis facilitates learning among partners, allowing deeper, more insightful analysis.

3. Invest in Relationships

Trust is a key aspect of effective collaboration. To build trust, both research and development organizations need to interact, share ideas or questions and eventually, learn together. This process requires exchanges, field visits - a learning process that engages researchers and development practitioners for joint solutions.

4. Cultivate an Organizational Support Network

An effective, shared learning culture takes time and effort to build. Consolidating a support network in both research and development organizations requires a long-term investment and support from staff and management. Often, precise steps and time frames become clear only as processes advance.

Coffee Diversification in Southern Colombia

Both empirical analyses and expert knowledge suggest that in southern Colombia, environmental conditions are perfect for producing high-quality coffee that fetches a premium market price. However, not all farmers in these areas take advantage of their environmental conditions to produce specialty coffee. So, while all farmers in these areas have a comparative advantage over other farmers in the country, some do not convert this into a competitive advantage.

- Identified regions to promote high-value specialty coffee and determined which high-value crops fit existing agro-ecological niches.
- Using advanced climate modeling, crop modeling and GIS tools, CIAT assisted partner private and public sectors agencies to evaluate competitive and comparative advantages.
- A coffee development strategy was developed in Nariño, Colombia to the benefit of 40,000 families. The Departmental Government received more than US\$5 million from Central Government, and novel business models to financially reward high-quality coffee were successfully introduced.

Building a learning agenda

1. Identifying the Learning Question

A kick-off workshop is held to explain the concept of learning cycles, identify and develop learning themes and settle on a collective agenda, set of shared questions for the learning cycle – like what do we hope to learn through this process - budget and responsibilities.

2. Documenting Existing Practice

After identifying the learning topic, the learning cycle focuses on documenting existing practice. This involves a scan of relevant literature to review other approaches specific to the learning topic, and a review of locally relevant experiences through desk studies or field level visits and documentation efforts. This is especially critical if the topic selected is one with previous interventions – effective or not – in the region.

3. Adapting Methods and Tools: Building a Prototype

Based on existing experiences, a first draft, or prototype, of methods and tools to apply at the field level is developed. This may require a write-shop to put together a toolkit for field testing, or an existing field guide or set of technology options the project seeks to adapt or innovate for the local context.

4. Training and Planning

Partner field staff receive prototype materials and are trained in methods and tools for field use, ensuring they are comfortable with them and can solve doubts. A field application work-plan is developed to guide the process, including a review of existing conditions and monitoring and evaluation guides to document results.

5. Field Application and Coaching

Based on the agreed work plan, the prototype is tested in a range of field sites. It is important to plan field level coaching activities with learning-cycle facilitators, external experts and field staff – and that field staff have virtual access to learning cycle facilitators and each other during implementation.

6. Document Results

Three levels of documentation are expected: (a) adaptations / innovations in the prototype; (b) lessons learned in the field level (c) results achieved prior to prototype implementation. A rigorous monitoring, evaluation and learning framework is incorporated from the start to generate robust evidence of what works, where, under what conditions and for whom.

7. Learning Selection and Feedback.

Participants (a) identify innovations / adaptations made to the prototype and make recommendations; (b) review potential uses of the prototype for project partners and document these, for example through household surveys (c) review what can be fed into public or private decision-making processes to influence larger change processes.

Inclusive Business in Central America and Peru

Designed around the LINK Methodology, a participatory toolkit was used to design, implement and evaluate inclusive trading relationships with smallholder farmers. A two-year learning cycle focused on building capacity in Central America, Peru and Haiti to assess and improve business models for sustained smallholder benefits. The cycle aimed to adapt existing, context-specific tools for business model evaluation, and build a common set of empirical data, case studies and lessons learned through Central American and Peruvian Learning Alliances.

- Twenty-four improved business models that positively impact the livelihoods of direct beneficiaries.
- Increased capacity among development practitioners in Central America, Peru and Haiti.
- A regionally adapted LINK methodology for Central America and tools developed by partners.
- Common data and documented case studies that improve development practice, influence regional donor and public policy discourse and improve understanding on the role of market linkages for poverty reduction in Central America and beyond.



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